

Seamless and secure

By **ANGELA BRANDT** - Independent Record - 10/29/08

Lewis and Clark County Sheriff Leo Dutton beamed Tuesday morning as he conducted a test of the Interoperability Montana radio system, which now links his department to Hill County.

"I'm about to make history," said Dutton, radio in hand.

The monumental message was sent up to Hill County Sheriff Don Brostrom in Havre, about 200 miles away.

"It may seem like a short blip, but for us it's like talking to the moon," Dutton explained to the nearly 20 officials in attendance in Helena. About two dozen others gathered at the sheriff's office in Havre for the occasion.

Brostrom said he heard the call loud and clear: "It was like he was standing right next to me."

The call to Havre marked the first for the northern tier of the state. In 2005, Lewis and Clark County was the first county in the state to embark on the state-of-the-art emergency radio communication network. The system allows law enforcement and other agencies responding to emergencies to securely and seamlessly communicate, meaning the radios will now automatically switch to the closest transmission repeater without interruption.

Dutton explained that before the \$150 million in improvements, hand-held radios would work on a repeater for about 15 to 20 miles. Officers would have to memorize all the repeater codes and switch accordingly. Now, the radios work more like cell phones and remain on the same channel with the user unaware of any changes.

It's an improvement on using cell phones as well, he said, because though phones



Lisa Kunkel IR staff photographer - Sheriff Leo Dutton beams while listening to Hill County Sheriff Don Brostrom respond to his radio message Tuesday morning in the Law Enforcement Center in Helena. Dutton communicated with Brostrom, who was in Havre, with a 6-watt handheld radio.

are good for one-on-one conversations, the radio system allows multiple officials and agencies to communicate at once.

Helena Police Chief Troy McGee said the network is working well, with just a few glitches.

"It's been very well-received," he said.

McGee said he is proud the system started in Lewis and Clark County, instigated by former Sheriff Sam McCormack and then passed on to Cheryl Liedle during her tenure as sheriff. Now it's Dutton's turn.

Lewis and Clark County Commission Chair Ed Tinsley tried out the service to congratulate Brostrom over the radio.

"This is just awesome," Tinsley said. "It's a big step for public safety in the state of Montana."

The plan is to have the network running statewide by 2013, Public Safety Services Bureau Chief Chris Christensen said, adding that all depends on funding. Grants from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Community Oriented Policing Services and FEMA Assistance to Fire Fighters — as well as funding from the state Legislature — have all contributed to the project.

While the technology improves daily functions for the agencies involved, it also can be used in cases like transporting a patient from a small town to a larger city.

Officials expect to have more than 100 radio repeater sites for a statewide network by the end of the project. The northern tier, which includes 12 counties and four Indian reservations, currently has 17 communication sites being worked on, and an additional 40 sites are being installed across the rest of the state.

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